

Virginie Sélavy

Writer. Film Scholar. Journalist. Editor.

Interview with Melvin and Mario Van Peebles



‘Maybe an asshole but a filmmaker’. That’s how Melvin Van Peebles, the legendary maverick whose revolutionary 1971 film *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* sparked Hollywood’s blaxploitation fever, describes himself. His actor and director son, sat next to him, exuding the same effortless cool, does not disagree, in spite of all the respect and esteem he evidently has for him. It is in this spirit, enthusiastic but truthful, full of admiration but critical, that Mario Van Peebles made *Baadasssss*, a vibrant, exhilarating docu-drama recounting his father’s struggle to get *Sweetback* made.

One of the first black film-makers in Hollywood, Van Peebles first had to take a detour via France to be able to direct in his native country. After seeing his short films, the director of the Paris Cinémathèque invited him over to France and, nine years later, Van Peebles’ *La Permission* was chosen to represent France at the 1967 San Francisco film festival. That got Van Peebles noticed in Hollywood and he was hired to direct the successful race comedy *Watermelon Man*. Just when it looked like he had made it he suddenly broke ranks with *Sweetback*, a raw, hard-hitting, edgy depiction of the black urban ghetto with, as a hero, a black hustler forced to go on the run after killing two white cops. Unable to find investors, Van Peebles used his own money, hired a multiracial crew against the rules of the all-powerful unions, and after finally completing the film through sheer bloody-mindedness, found that only two cinemas in the

whole of the United States would show his film. Through word-of-mouth and the Black Panthers' mobilisation, however, *Sweetback* took up and became the highest grossing independent film of the year.

In an interview conducted in 2005, father and son discussed how, thirty years on, nothing much has changed in Hollywood.

Mario Van Peebles: To some degree, it's like a pot with boiling water, if you keep the lid pressed on it, eventually the pot will explode. If you lift the lid periodically, you can keep people oppressed for a lot longer. If you let the steam out and you give them some awards, a couple of Oscars, say 'you deserve it, you're terrific', you might forget the fact that there's no head of any studio that is black, Asian, Hispanic or female. But when I wanted to make a film like *Baadaasssss*, I sent my script and I was told that if I made a hip-hop comedy out of it, and added a rap soundtrack, they would make the movie. They said that my father was too political, too sexy, too black, the film was too multiracial and they couldn't figure out where to slot it in. And I had to make him a more likeable character. My dad was very cool, he said 'hey, make me who I am, tell the truth'. Once I realised this, I thought, well, I made most of my other films for about \$8 million and in about 40 days. I made *Baadaasssss* for \$1 million in 18 days. It makes a big difference. So in a weird way, 30 years later, to communicate this message, to show people of all colours, we had to do it in the same way that my father made the original film.

Virginie Sélavy: What do you think of films such as *Shaft* and *Superfly*? You made your film as an independent filmmaker but those films were made in Hollywood.

Melvin Van Peebles: What happened was, *Sweetback* made all this money. Hollywood desires money but they could not stand the political content so they emptied the formula, they took out the political content and made it more cartoonish and that became blaxploitation. One of the things that happened is that *Sweetback* is so steeped in the ambience that they had to hire black screenwriters, black choreographers, etc, so many people got to learn their craft that way. It was a step. Because of the fixation on race, we often overlook the fact that *Sweetback* was the beginning of independent film, not just black independent film. So I'm the godfather of those films as well as *The Blair Witch Project* or *Motorcycle Diaries*. I made those things possible too.

VS: How do you feel about the term blaxploitation?

Melvin: It's not my term. I don't consider myself a sociologist, I consider myself a filmmaker, among other things. Maybe an asshole but a filmmaker.

Mario: If I can add something here, *Sweetback* was a revolutionary film but in the subsequent films, when big money got involved, they made cops hip, they made drug dealers hip so the message gets diluted. But there is a difference too: if you make a series of Vietnam-themed films, *Apocalypse Now* etc, they won't say it's white film, it's a genre of film. But if you make *Shaft*, *Superfly*, etc, they won't say it's a genre, it's got black actors in it so they call it black film.

VS: How did you start in the film industry? When you made *Watermelon Man*, how many black filmmakers were working in Hollywood at that time?

Melvin: I came to San Francisco in 1967 as the French delegate to the festival. They didn't know I was black or American. There is a law in France that says that a writer can have a temporary identity card. So I wrote fifty words in French and I got my card. I made a film called *La*

Permission (The Story of a Three-Day Pass) in France and the film won the San Francisco festival and I was the only black person there. So before me, there was nothing. They didn't expect the French delegate to be black. They also didn't expect the French delegate to be American.

VS: How did you end up being the French delegate?

Melvin: I'm smart. ... I was studying mathematics and astronomy in Holland. Henri Langlois at the Cinémathèque saw my first short films and he invited me to go to France. There was a little cinema on the Champs-Élysées where they showed my films and afterwards, we go downstairs and everybody hugs me and kisses me. And I'm standing in the middle of the Champs-Élysées, no money, I can't say a word of French. That's how I came to France. Nine years later I was their delegate. So when that happened, that embarrassed the Americans because they could not have the only black American director a French director so they offered me jobs, which I did not accept, and that forced them to look for others and certainly they discovered other black directors, discovered they were there the whole time, Gordon Parks, the guy got a chance to make a film, and Ossie Davis too.

VS: What happened after *Sweetback*?

Melvin: When I made *Watermelon Man* I had a three-picture deal with Colombia but I decided it was time now to attack my plan, my master plan. And my master plan was to retake the images. The long and the short of it is that when *Sweetback* became very successful, because no one expected it to become successful except for me, only two theatres wanted to show it. But the movie was a runaway success and everybody began to show it. Colombia were so angry that they tore up my contract. That's what happened to me. However, they did take the formula and take out the political content. And that caricature, that became blaxploitation.

VS: After *Sweetback*, did you want to make more films like that?

Melvin: Yeah, it's a trilogy, I never had a chance to make the other parts. I made a couple other American films which no one would distribute because it's too dangerous, no one owns me. I own *Sweetback* 100%, I've got no partner, I own the music, the book, everything. I had to do it all alone so it's all mine. And no one would help me. Bill [Cosby] loaned me money at one stage of the game but even he would not take a piece of the movie. He only wanted his money back. This is what I've taught Mario and I'm very pleased. He not only knows how to play the game but how to own the team. That's very important.

VS: You could have done a documentary but you decided to do a fictionalised drama. Why did you decide to go with that option?

Mario: I wanted to be able to get into all those places where a documentary wouldn't go, like the relationship between my father and me, and I thought that it was such a wonderful period. But beyond the fact that it's true it's really about one person standing up and making it. It's like *Rocky*, it's a very classic story.

Melvin: I'm confused by your question. What about *Beautiful Mind* or *Kinsey*, would you call them fictions or docu-dramas? Fiction takes you to another place and everything in the movie is true.

Mario: Yeah, yeah, yeah. But then, in a weird way, in the interviews with the characters, it almost gets to be mockumentary. But at the end it does become a documentary, so it changes forms. And it also feels like at times it's a making of, like someone had walked around with a camera, capturing this wonderful time, when you had all those people, you could see Janet Jackson and Jimi Hendrix and Santana on the same set. And today it would be black radio, Latino radio and rock and be fragmented. And this was a time when everybody was on this movie set, we had every demographic, we even had kid demographic, I was one of the kid demographic, and what a quirky, interesting time to show and to relive, go back to those streets, go back to my father's life in essence with a camera, talk to Bill Cosby, talk to Jose Garcia, talk to Ossie Davis, and go back to that time.

VS: That form, whatever you choose to call it, works really well for the film.

Mario: It is a strange thing. I hadn't really thought about that but what happened was once I realised that no one was gonna back it and that I was going to have to make it with my savings, same as how my dad made it, without money, something else simultaneously happened. My muse, my little angel who speaks to me, suddenly said (*he switches to a squeaky voice*) 'what studio is gonna take it? What are they gonna make you do?', that was my muse said and I said, 'guess what, no studio took it so I'll do it myself'. So I could literally have a parliament with myself, I could go 'Oh, let's see if the director likes it', 'I like it', 'Well, I don't know if the writer will approve', 'I like it', 'well, let's see if the lead actor likes it', 'I like it'. Once I realised this, it was like 'what now?! We can just take this form further out! Because now it's just me and I'm just gonna do my own shit.' So once that happened, I didn't have to please anybody. And I wasn't even aware of the fact that my muse was self-editing already so that I could say it's like this movie or like that movie, because if I couldn't say that the movie was like anything else before, I couldn't explain it to the financiers, and I couldn't get it done. But with my own finances, I could go 'now I want the thing to go black and white', and 'I want to have an angel, and the angel sits on the ceiling' Who would let you do that? Who would let you have Malcolm and Dr. King talk to the character in a movie? It's a very rare thing that you get to go that far.

VS: Did you worry at any point that it might turn into some bizarre Freudian thing? Because you play your dad in *Baadasssss* and in *Sweetback* you played your father's character as a young boy.

Mario: (*laughs*) Every now and then I stand back from my life and go 'wow, that's kind of wild! I didn't have a lot of time to think in the process but certain things happened. My son was also in the movie, playing the little angel. When he was playing the angel, the camera broke down. We were shooting on the actual street that my dad lived on, on a lady's lawn. She really liked me as a kid, but she likes me less now! We're shooting on her lawn and now she wants me off her lawn, the sun is going down, the camera's broken and no one's eaten lunch and everybody's getting pretty grouchy and my son is running off to have lunch with the other kids... and I heard my dad's voice: 'Get back here, this is not a hobby, this is our family business, you wanted to be in the movies, now you're in it, now do your job!' There's my father's voice coming into my head! And I'm like, 'this is getting really scary now!' So I found in making the film that things like that came up all the time. But recently my dad made good on something that had been outstanding for about 33 years. He finally gave me that bicycle, the bike that I didn't get. They did a re-issue of it and I got the bike. Now my kids can ride the bike. It means nothing to them but to me, I'm like, 'I've got that bike!' There were lots of times when I had to stop and laugh at the inevitable, you know, that in some ways truth is stranger than fiction.

VS: You don't shy away from the controversial aspects of *Sweetback* and your relationship with your dad, in particular when he made you play a sex scene on film as a teenager. And it's fascinating to see the conflict, and the drive, Melvin, you seem to be willing to sacrifice the well-being of your children in order to finish your film.

Melvin: That's absolutely true. That's absolutely true. I think his reaction is completely valid. Hey, but I'm the parent!

Mario: You know, what's interesting is I wouldn't do what he did at the time, but my kids are gonna have objections to how I parent. At the end of the day though, if they respect what I stood for, that's cool.

VS: Was this a way of dealing with it and finding out how you feel about it now?

Mario: No. I've done that before. I could have made a hand-held movie about that. That's a personal thing. I had already cleared things with him on that. He'd said to me 'Look, tell the truth'. And I said, that's the way to do this movie. And that was another reason I had to go independent. People are now looking at the world in terms of axis of evil and evil-doers and by logical extension good-doers, and that's a very polarised look at good and bad people. Reality is much more complex than that and people can be good and evil on the very same day. The other thing is that, as a kid, I sometimes felt I was involved in a battle without understanding the war. But in the course of that summer I saw that there was something bigger out there. It's like stepping your toe is a bad experience but when the person next to you loses their leg in a landmine it's somehow crushed by something bigger. And then you see that that person is trying to go on and save other people from some situation by putting himself at risk. This was a guy who could have gone off and made money in the system and taken a nice picture with a suit on in front of a big mansion that he bought and been held up as an example to the rest of us to sort of follow in line behind. And here he says 'Fuck you, I'm gonna have a multiracial crew, I'm gonna do a revolutionary film and I'm gonna do my own thing.' I could have done *New Jack City* II and III and IV, but I said no, I'm gonna make a film about the Panthers and *Baadasssss* for no money. I don't have to risk my house at this juncture and yet there's a different value, it's not just economic value, it's social and political and artistic. And I think that's a nice thing to pass to your kids.

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Picture credit: *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (Dir. Melvin Van Peebles, 1971).



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